

The use of Winnicott's concept of transitional objects in bereavement practice



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Abstract: Working with young children, Donald Winnicott (1951) identified transitional objects as items which were both created and discovered by an infant for comfort, and to support the developmental necessity of separating from their primary caregiver. In adulthood, the keeping and holding of a physical object, for example a piece of jewellery owned by a loved one who has died, is frequently seen as supportive for bereaved people but is rarely named or conceptualised as a transitional object. Taking an object relations perspective, the aim of this review will be to consider research and literature within bereavement theory and practice in order to suggest how transitional objects can be conceptualised in grief work across all life stages. Examples from research and the authors own therapeutic practice will be shared in order to suggest ways in which the use of transitional objects can support therapeutic practice with bereaved people.

Keywords: grief, transitional objects, object relations, bereavement, therapy

Introduction

The primary purpose of this paper is to support those working with bereaved people to gain an understanding of Donald Winnicott's theory of transitional objects (Winnicott, 1951), in order to develop understanding and therapeutic practice. A brief summary of Winnicott's theory alongside contemporary writing about the use of transitional objects will be presented. This paper will then consider the concept of grief work within object relations theory, and will align different perspectives with contemporary theories of bereavement. These two areas of research will then be integrated using literature from both fields in order to draw parallels between early childhood development and bereavement in all life stages with reference to examples of bereaved peoples experience of transitional objects. Examples from therapeutic work, both from research across different cultural contexts and the author's own work with bereaved young people, will be critically assessed in order to review the use of transitional objects in clinical practice and to suggest areas of future research and practice development.

Transitional objects

While it has long been observed that young children take pleasure and comfort from the holding of a cherished physical object, the concept of the transitional object was introduced by Donald Winnicott in his influential work '*Transitional objects and Transitional phenomena*' (1951). A transitional object was identified as a material object, for example a teddy bear or doll, used by infants and young children for comfort and the reduction of anxiety, which allowed them security when exploring further from their primary attachment figure (Schiffrin, 2009). In his clinical work, Winnicott observed that young children experienced an almost addictive attachment to these physical objects and that the object became essential to the child in order to comfort them in times of temporary separation from their attachment figure, for example at bedtimes (Winnicott, 1951).

A transitional object is seen by Winnicott as a way infants can transition successfully from their separate individual identity to forming healthy relationships with others (St George, 2013). Importantly, Winnicott (1971)

was clear that the transitional object or phenomena was not the actual object, for example the teddy bear, cloth or child's thumb itself, but the use of the object by the child, the meaning and value associated with that use:

'It is not the object, of course, which is transitional. The object represents the infant's transition from a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate.' (Winnicott, 1971, pp. 14–15)

While the concept of the transitional object as described by Winnicott was seen as supporting relational transitions between a mother and child in early childhood, contemporary examples of the use of transitional objects in other attachment relationships and across the entire life span have been identified. Literature presents examples of use, for example in young adult life transitions in the United States (Gregorio, 2005), by US military personnel in conflict situations (St George, 2013), and for older adults in the UK when moving house (Stevens & Solway, 2019).

While Winnicott's work did not reference the use of transitional objects as a response to grief specifically, the use of objects by individuals who have lost someone close to them is identified in research and practice. For example, in his seminal research with parentally bereaved children, Worden (1996) identified that 77% of children kept something that belonged to their parent. Research with an adult population is less specific, but examples of the use of supportive objects are widespread. However, notably, where the use of objects is seen in bereavement and loss they are frequently labelled as a memory or symbolic item rather than explicitly conceptualised as a transitional object (Worden, 2018). This paper will suggest that the explicit naming and conceptualisation of supportive objects in bereavement as transitional objects can offer an additional depth of understanding for bereaved people and those who work with them.

Grief in object relations theory

Grief, the normal response to a loss through death (Worden, 2018), has been described, in object relations terms, as a process of the relational adjustment of a bereaved person to the loss of someone who was significant in their life (Kernberg, 2010). Interestingly, this adjustment is seen both internally in the bereaved person's sense of self, and externally in their physiological reactions. Described by Klein (1940), and arguably better understood by bereaved people in their daily experience of grief, the loss of a loved one involves an initial fragmentation of the self, due to unconscious identification with the person who died and understanding of the need for a changed relationship with them. In contrast, Bowlby (1961) emphasises the external physiological dimensions

of withdrawing from the person who has died, particularly the necessity for weeping and anger.

Importantly, Klein's view of mourning didn't involve moving away to eventual separation from a relationship with the person who died, described as the 'lost object', but rather described the bereaved person working slowly towards developing a changed, but ongoing, relationship with them (Kernberg, 2010). Kleinian grief work, therefore, is considered to be focused on the internal relationships with the person who died and the restructuring of the superego of the bereaved person in order to set up a new internalised object relationship with the lost object (Kernberg, 2010). This perspective is observed to be very much in line with contemporary models of bereavement. For example, the dual process model of grief (Schut & Henk, 1999) describes how individuals are seen to oscillate between looking back at their life with the person who died (loss orientation) and looking forward to an altered future (restoration orientation).

Klein's object relations perspective on bereavement recognises the difficult duality of the tasks of mourning; maintaining both superego restructuring without the lost object but also preserving a relationship with the person who died (Gaines, 1997). As recognised by the theory of continuing bonds (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 2014), this process can be difficult and painful for bereaved people. However, phenomenological studies of bereaved people support the value of maintaining relationships with the individual who died (Boelen, Stroebe, Schut, & Zijerveld, 2006). For example, in an Australian study of the use of relational narratives in therapy with parents who experienced the death of a baby, the use of counselling to explore the ongoing and changed identity of the child who was lost was seen as supportive for parents (Hedtke & Kristensen, 2018).

In addition, through consideration of the ongoing relational dimensions of loss, bereaved individuals may become engaged in a search for transcendental value systems in line with superego modification which can lead to changes to an individual's internal working model (Kohut, 1985). Research suggests that, where death is traumatic, necessitating a deeper level of engagement with the loss, this can, in the longer term, lead to profound positive identify change (Wakenshaw & Sillence, 2018). This perspective is aligned to the theory of benefit finding in bereavement (Neimeyer, 2000) where grief is suggested as a life experience that can bring previously unanticipated benefits to an individual in terms of their sense of self.

Role of transitional objects in grief within an object relations perspective

Within an object relations perspective, the two tasks of mourning are for an individual to detach from the physical relationship with the 'lost object', while maintaining a

continuing connection with this person (Gaines, 1997). In the same way that the role of transitional objects in early life is to support the child's ego and give them greater control over their external reality and support a child through the temporary absence of their primary attachment figure (Winnicott, 1971), in grief it may be considered that a transitional object can support an individual through the loss of attachment figures through death at any stage in the lifespan.

In the same way that in early childhood development an infant uses a transitional object to support a transition away from the primary attachment figure, in grief a transitional object can be seen to be a bridge between the conscious and unconscious and the world of the living and of the dead (Schiffirin, 2009). Writing about the sudden death of his 14-year-old son Kadian in the UK, Thomas Harding describes how a physical object, a ceramic cube made for Thomas by Kadian before his death, exemplified the complexities of bereavement as a transitional time between life and death;

'And now here was this object, magically arriving at our door. Impossibly arriving, after he was no longer here. Because though Kadian is gone, he is still very much here, at least in part.' (Harding, 2020)

Transitional objects have been observed to change their value and qualities through the process of grief, from an initial stance of the bereaved person physically holding on to the person who died, to letting go of the object over time. Gibson (2004) presents an Australian example of a bereaved woman who described wearing her husband's jumper for weeks immediately following his death. For her, the value of the object was in the physical connection with her husband: 'I used to hug myself in it and press it against my body. I must have sucked all his smell out of it' (p.288). However, in a later interview, this individual was initially unable to recall where the jumper was and realised that she had packed it away: 'I think about it sometimes ... I suppose I don't need it like I did' (p.288). This observation links closely with Winnicott's observation that, in typically developing children, the importance of transitional objects is relegated over time, although can be brought back into use in difficult periods in life (Winnicott, 1951).

Examples of the use of transitional objects in therapeutic practice

Object relations theory provides a clear rationale for grief work. Following the fragmentation of the self after a loss, the purpose of therapeutic work is to support the ego of the bereaved person and their changed internal representation of the person who has died in order to develop a new and ongoing relationship with them. Transitional objects, therefore, can be used to facilitate

the path through the grieving process between attachment and loss (LeDuff, Lawrence, Bradshaw, & Blake, 2017). In contemporary clinical practice a range of examples of the use of transitional objects have been identified. It is noted that memory items can be both the making of a new object, for example the making of a memory jar, or the collection or keeping of already existing objects, such as the making of a memory box. It is suggested that both of these ways of collecting or keeping memories would be considered as transitional objects and would be supportive for bereaved individuals depending on the circumstances and preference of the individual.

In a US study of parents immediately following perinatal loss, Le Duff et al (2017) described the use of 'memory items' in terms of making and keeping meaningful memories. The breadth of objects described by bereaved parents is extensive but included items such as weight records, baby clothing and photographs. Transitional objects are identified as helpful in this specific loss as they allow parents who 'are not supposed to leave the hospital empty handed' (Le Duff et al., 2017, p. 349) with both a physical reminder of their baby and a validation of their parental role.

An older but still interesting example is the use of the therapeutic bereavement group as transitional object itself. In a study of a group for gay men widowed by HIV/AIDS in The Netherlands, Maasen (1998) identified that throughout the stages of the group from dependency, through joint ventures (such as shared holidays), toward interdependency, and later independence, the group represented a supportive transitional object which facilitated separation from the lost objects of the group's members. In the same way that a transitional object in childhood allowed the child a holding environment (Winnicott, 1951), for Maasen the therapeutic group was observed to allow members, temporarily, to support each other, and develop new bonds away from their original attachment object.

In addition to transitional objects which have a link with the person who died or the loss itself, transitional objects can also be crafted during the therapeutic process, for example using sand tray work or craft materials (Sas & Coman, 2016). These therapy-based objects can be used to allow bereaved people to project their feelings, emotions, memory associations and unconscious associations onto a tangible object which can then be supportive throughout grief. In the author's own therapeutic work with bereaved young people, the use of memory jars to represent the person who died was experienced as a powerful way to elicit emotions and for the young person to work through their feelings of loss. Memory jars, where different coloured salt or sand is layered in a jar to represent memories of the person who has died are frequently used in bereavement therapy (McGuinness, Finucane, & Roberts, 2015). The young person is invited to share their memories while

making the jar and then take the jar home with them to be kept as a special object. In line with an object relations perspective of a transitional object, the author recognised that young people found both the crafting and keeping of their memory jar provided a physical and supportive link to the person who had died allowing comfort during separation.

While the review has highlighted a range of examples of the use of transitional objects in bereavement therapy, research in this area remains limited (LeDuff et al., 2017). Despite the use of supportive objects in grief work and the intuitive understanding that a physical reminder of the person who died can be comforting to bereaved people, contemporary research into both therapeutic practice and impact on bereavement outcomes is more limited. While research presented provides some support for the use of transitional objects at the time of loss, there is a lack of evidence for the longer term impact on bereaved people (Carter, 2011). Despite this, the use of memory objects in clinical practice is widespread. For example, Cruse Bereavement care in the UK encourages the use of memory objects in client work during training for bereavement counsellors and in support material available online: 'Make a memory box. Gather together letters, badges, photographs, and keepsakes you have from your loved one and put them into a special memory box that you can reopen and reminisce over when you need to' (Cruse, 2020). Given the frequency of the use of transitional objects in practice, in contrast with the limitations in research highlighted by this review, it is suggested that the efficacy of the use of transitional objects in therapeutic practice is worthy of future research.

Conclusion

As early childhood, where an infant transitions from a 'state of merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate' (Winnicott, 1951), grief involves bereaved people moving from a physical and emotional closeness to the person who died, to a position of being more separate and engaging in an ongoing but changed relationship with them. Throughout these highly complex relational states the use of a transitional object has been demonstrated to be supportive, as it is in early childhood. Through a range of examples, and in line with object relations and bereavement theory, transitional objects have been shown to be able to effectively mediate a space in the existential loss of grief. However, it is observed that memory items are rarely conceptualised as transitional objects in either training or practice for bereavement counsellors (Worden, 2018). It is suggested that a greater emphasis on the naming and theoretical underpinning of the use of transitional objects both in training in practice would be supportive for therapists and clients in bereavement practice. ■

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